

## Talking Through The Wire

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How does The Wire generate or expand conversations about issues traditionally engaged in television studies— notions of narrative and psychological complexity, quality television, representations of race/class/sexuality, serial television, place/geographic specificity, and “authorship?” Does the series say something new in these regards? More broadly, does the show facilitate conversations about politics and society in ways rarely addressed by politicians and the mass media? That is, can this series enliven and/or re-engage the governmental infrastructure in discussions of entrenched social problems?

The dual thrust of this set of questions could obscure a major factor. Is it possible to fully answer the questions in the “second part” of the paragraph without considering those in the first? This query doesn’t necessarily suggest that the first set of questions must be answered first. It merely indicates that questions about “conversations” of any sort, and specifically those concerning “politics and society,” when appearing in examples of expressive culture are embedded in the aesthetically slanted questions that come earlier. To understand this entanglement better, reconsider the paragraph with the general foci reversed.

More broadly, does [The Wire] facilitate conversations about politics and society in ways rarely addressed by politicians and the mass media? That is, can this series enliven and/or re-engage the governmental infrastructure in discussions of entrenched social problems? How does The Wire generate or expand conversations about issues traditionally engaged in television studies— notions of narrative and psychological complexity, quality television, representations of race/class/sexuality, serial television, place/geographic specificity, and “authorship?” Does the series say something new in these regards?

Neither is necessarily more important than the other unless we add – and I think we almost always do – matters of our own political, social, ethical and moral commitments. These are the conversations we already must, or should, engage in, that drive our work. We probably do assume that such personal imperatives are always operative, which begs the question of why we might end up here attending more intently to “The Wire” than to “Gossip Girl.” (It also begs the question of whether or not we should attend to the one more than the other.) Put another way, do the more “aesthetically” or “formally” slanted questions deal with matters that brought us to the series in the first place? Or, still another way, is there something “special” about ‘The Wire” that implies a professional commitment to old ways of making distinctions, ways dependent on the privilege afforded the kinds of complexity so often associated with “quality television” and “high art?” Do the ways in which the “conversations” are shaped have something to do with our attention? If so, does that matter? Another version of these last questions could be something like this: do the ways in which these stories are told have something to do with who participates in the conversations and, perhaps more importantly, why they participate? These factors certainly matter if we examine the relatively low ratings of

a series which appears on a premium channel already restricting, in some way, the reach of, the participants in, the "conversations."

My sense is that "The Wire" is one of the very best television series ever to be programmed anywhere, that it does fit many notions of "quality," that it is experimenting with televisual narrative, that professional success (another way to describe some forms of "authorial" matters in television) does play a major role, and so on.

But as I try to recollect which specific elements were especially daring, I also find myself thinking that much of the series was conventional. The lengthy interweaving of storylines may seem more complicated simply because of the longer intervals between clusters of programs. The movement of various storylines and characters into different arrangements in the narrative, sometimes central, sometimes peripheral, may lead to a greater sense of characterization. The complexity of some characterizations, breaking with conventions of good/bad, victimizer/victim added some sense of psychological daring. But finally, all these are matters of degree. With the exception of its focus on racialized individuals and communities, many of these same elements are found throughout television programming, and even the racially charged elements are appearing elsewhere in strong versions.

More time, more money. Every writer/producer claims they could do as well with those. Yet I'm not so sure. Somehow the elements still add up to more. The writing, the stories themselves, the deeper probes of causation, the taking for granted of elements (such as murder) that worry more conventional programs, all contribute the sense that this is special work. I think it takes a special commitment – and a special arrogance – to make something like "The Wire."

The other questions remain. Even if it is somehow "special," does the show facilitate conversations about politics and society in ways rarely addressed by politicians and the mass media? That is, can this series enliven and/or re-engage the governmental infrastructure in discussions of entrenched social problems? Can any television series do these things? How? For whom? If government officials missed it, do "our" conversations about it "re-engage" them in discussions? Should we put officials in closed rooms and force them to watch the series?

What do "we" want to talk about when we talk about "The Wire?" To whom are we talking?